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Writing Sample

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Includes "Escurana," "Doer," untitled poems, and "Exultet."

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Beverly PÉREZ REGO

POEMS

Esurana

He thinks I am a saint.

He's crazy.

Saints are brown and tiny,
or white as chalk,
and do not scream,
like me under his body.

He thinks I am holy.

I know: he smears me with saliva,
covers me with gauze,
and lights candles.

He says: *Make me a miracle.*

Then, gathering the twelve members
of his unfaithful body,
I sew, cross stitch,
on the white surface.

It looks like an alphabet, he says,
and the stitches hurt.

The dry thread
prints his flesh.

I'm ready, he announces.

You can read me.

I know what's coming.

I cover my face
as he leaves.

Goodbye, *Escurana*.

That is my name

when he walks out my door.

(from *Escurana*, 2004)

Doer

Long ago
(or now, sleeping beside me)
There was a man,
who founded families.
From village to village, house to house,
gates sprung open, bolts were unlocked,
and he passed through all doors.
He only knocked once,
and that was enough.

From village to village, house to house,
he left his hands, legs,
his arms, his trunk and head,
for us to keep and hold.
These were his parts, of him, wondrous,
we were the maidens of his seeds,
and the seeds sprouted children,
and every child was born
with a loaf of bread under one tiny arm,
and a book under the other.

*Look at the hills,
look how he fills the homes,
how he covers them with his children,
they said.*

*Look how he knocks on the doors,
and upon entering, sometimes eats,
sometimes laughs, others sleeps,
laying his fist down on every table,
always laughing even as he says goodbye
and descends
always laughing and laughing.*

I thought:
It must be him. The Doer.
But he did not care.

And all awaited him,
every chair, every bed,
and all the chairs and beds

were tamed in the waiting.

Horses green as forests
followed him everywhere
should he have to flee in the night-
if he stayed, if he could not
untangle his legs from mine,
he dispatched them
by merely raising his hand.

Coffee boiled in the cups,
ears of corn burst between his teeth,
and stayed there, gold, shining,
and he laughed, with gold teeth.

Bring me a goat, he said
and we all ran into the yard.
Bring me liquor made with worms,
and we jumped into the storerooms.
Now, listen
as I speak and speak,
and we all stood still, waiting.
Now,
bring me ink and paper.

But he could not write.
His hand shook.

That night,
I taught him.

(from *Escurana*, 2004)

There are women who ask me to free them from gossip,
There are women who ask me for the death of their rivals.
Others call me to let go of a man-
Other want his member tied in wire.
They are souls lost for love
And demand vengeance
Because they are lonely, ugly, old.
I fix them.
I charge for my art.
The tongues fall like dry snakes, the rivals die.
But
When the intensely desired man returns,
because they always come back,
crawling, meek,
I please them, I comply, collect my fare,
And pity them.

(from *Grimoire*, 2002)

Disown me, father, give me the ropes and blades that will cease your presence in all features and words, free me of the knots on the seductive pages whispering your past of fable. If you can only give me the reverberating slashes of your anger, let me embroider them with the stealth of a peasant. Show me the death you carry in your heels and disinherit me, father: spill the stones from your mouth, and may your crest lay low and your steps fail to rise and your eyes return to the falconer. Cease all astonishment, father, deplete your miracles, go to asleep and become vast.

(From *Art of Glass*, 1992)

Take my body:
your dark wing clothes me
with familiar rigor.

Take my name:
the voices that called me
are silenced forever.

Take my life:
the certainty that it is mine
has made me lose it.

I am afraid to write myself
and hit the target.

(From *Book of Falconry*, 1994)

Because there is no honor in your sorrow and your wound is bad, I've brought you down. With pain that is mine, I shear you, turn the gut into your body through the hole where it came from, and hold the flesh between my fingers.

Then, with respect for your aching, I take the needle -its peak not too thick- dip it in water and salt, heat it. I sew the slab with silken thread. Over the stitches, I lay mastic, white wine and *alosna*, which is bitter incense.

Now that you are cross and tired, eat lentils from my hand. Rest in my cold and dark house, let no one frighten you. Stay wrapped in linen, belly up.

Forgive my hand, the hand of a bad hunter.

(From *Book of Falconry*, 1994)

These birds, austere,
black,
peaks closed
empty, silent,
descend
in perfect circles,
as distant tornadoes
over the flat lands of Arkansas,
where shops open,
schools glisten,
the anthems of the day are sung,
and no one expects them.
No one.

(From *Book of Falconry*, 1994)

Autumn drags its putrid leafs through the logs. The green has gone too soon. The language of plagiarism ripples in your window. Before her voluptuous cilices, confess: show her your soft nakedness. It is the only way out.

All books have failed. You pray, roar, but no one listens; when you stoke all your anger, only a pitiful flash appears. Confess: tell your minute story, your pagan story. There is almost no time.

Death itself makes its entrance on royal horses of fire. Tell it all.

Endless page, white anaconda, uncover your face, confess: it is your only salvation.

(From *Book of Falconry*, 1994)

There is a species whose white body is interrupted by dark lines, forming a kind of writing. So painted by the hand of God, they seem to be a book written with bold letters.

They must be submitted in haste, as they are given to treachery, and reveal in the prose of their loins the poorly kept secrets of the master's house.

Perhaps because they bear the most feared language, as fierce and loved books, these birds are known to provide little respite.

And when they die, their masters cover them with cloths soaked in camphor and, relieved, lay them on the ground.

(From *Book of Falconry*, 1994)

I only pray that my soul be an Etruscan vessel. Black, impenetrable, locked: a bird of prey who sleeps with one eye open.

In the white light of day, may my onyx soul be a panther guided by Your hand through the rice fields.

Upon entering the fortress of Your grains, no one must recognize me. Let no one await me.

Father, in the depths of the abysmal summer, make me the solid point, the black rock: Your image, Your likeness.

(From *Book of Falconry*, 1994)

In the hour of my invisibility, I invoke:

Earth, white dial, quench the fires of your gems, succumb, learn to lie still between His fingers.

Flow in the humility of the streams that you have invented: quench in them your fierceness.

God, who soon will want to annihilate us, has finally opened His portals to the weak of spirit.

(From *Book of Falconry*, 1994)

IF YOU FEAR HIM, HE WILL COME

said my mother when she put me to bed.

Only if you fear him.

And still the shadows are exquisite rags

inside the half-open closet,

still the mist under the bed,

from where a hand rises

if I fail in my watch,

if I fall asleep .

Before I met you, I always wondered who *he* was.

Now, I love the fear

that drives you to my room,

as I love the shadows, the dark beings

dragging their wings in the night.

They have always been with me,

while I await you,

my body spread in panic.

Only if you fear him, she said,

long ago,

before I knew you.

(From *Providencia*, 1997)

FRANCISCA, INÉS, JULIANA, ZITA, EUFRASIA, BERTILA:

I cannot find the door, *Benedictas*. I find no comfort, beloved. The core of my fear holds me in its grip. The tip of a hook sticks out of my mouth.

Matilde, Margarita, Clotilde, Esmeralda:

Half my life lies in ash. My life bites its evil scales; it smiles, lost, buried in the earth.

Beloved, bring the oil, the vessel, the bands. Free me of my votes. Seal my pride. Clean at last, may I lie still, a forgotten relic.

Through me into the vacuum, Sacred, as the waters cover the earth, and no dry land is left for faith to be reborn.

(From *Providencia*, 1997)

Hour of truth:

You have arrived as fire that ravages the crops. The dark animal that quacks in the barn. The hyena: you only come when death is sated.

Before, bitter canvases blinded my eyes. My white eyes, turned toward the haze, while you crawled slowly, irremediable, as the acid drip of jealousy between sisters.

Now, you spurt thick, warm, from the open neck of a black rooster.

My body bends under your weight. My legs surround you. My hands seek your neck, your crest.

Hour, erase everything. Stain my apron with thick yeast, crush the stem with your mallet. Let the bread of my dinner grow voracious, black.

Do it now, after the harm is done.

(From *Providencia*, 1997)

I remember the women who lit the long virile night. Indoors, they wove, bereaved, not seeing their fabric. It was the maze of their bodies: they entered it as the man entered them, and from it they emerged injured, wise, alive.

I see the forces conjured in the making of their flesh, see how eager they were to undo it, and they gave milk to the children and meat to the masters. The hearth burned in the houses, while water whistled through the teeth of flames. And the man's voice boomed on the roofs, like hooves of immortal horses.

I know them. They are the women who inhabit my body, those who lived in it before, who will inherit its ashes, its wetness. Women whose eyes are the same, my eyes, before they came into the world, after the world forgets.

(From *Providencia*, 1997)

My mother says: *disarray and impurity open houses to the presence of evil*. Entire families, she notes, have been ruined because of their indolence. A mere oversight, and the language of vice stretches out on the carpets. Haste, an inept advisor, stains silverware with the oilcloth of sin, and leads it back to its cave of origin. Dust haunts the conscience of the wicked, and my mother sees the mites of curse riding in hosts.

Not the body: the house is the temple, says my mother, and in her inexplicable tenderness she protects us. She opens up her skirts in fury against the tempting dirt. *Not the flesh, but the walls that house it*, and hear her pleas in the night.

(From *Providencia*, 1997)

After her decapitation, her head was taken to Mount Sinai. Angels pulled her fine hair to the top. There she remained silent, in pious meditation.

Her forehead throbbed in the leaves. Her eyes half open, staring into space. Blue veins sprouted from the stem of the old throat, and from them flowed the heavy ink of an octopus.

In the spring, the Mount, ark of Saints, was a nest of asphodel. The sudden growth broke the skyline.

Then, her thirsty veins took root in humus. Her fertile eyes opened over the valley, and admired it. They saw nothing that was not the desert, the vast writing of His wound.

(From *Providencia*, 1997)

Poetry is will.

It's true:

It is not a string of words sitting comfortably on the intellect;

It is not intimidating wisdom or a glimpse of your lot in life:

It does not appeal to the intelligence, nor seeks to seduce.

It is not an idea.

It's an *order*.

If you have it,

Not even the highest destiny can save you.

Sometimes we kneel and pray for it not to come-

But if it does do, it will kill you

Or makes you its slave.

It is the black spot before blindness,

The black art, the blackest of the arts.

The solid clarity of the poem is paid for, in life,

with a weak spine,

with dementia.

You do not negotiate with it.

You live in spite of it.

Poetry, believe me, is not a gift

It is will.

(From *Grimorio*, 2002)

Exultet

River *Aguadía*, River *Grita*, Rio *Grande*,
I had risen,
I was a child,
I passed through the corridor to the kitchen
and stopped at the door of the room,
And there, hidden
I waited for my cousin
I, who only spurted water.

Rivers of air,
rivers where my I bathed my beloved
and undressed my children,
I had risen,
and entered and left the church,
but, as for prayers,
I only knew the rosary of my women.

And the prayer sufficed.
I set foot on your hands,
I stretched forth from them,
and ascended into heaven
to ride in my cart.

And I rode there shining
over the fiery land,

over your tears,
the milk for my children,
over the rivers Grande,
Grita,
Aguadía.

(From *Escurana*, 2004)

Translated from the Spanish by the author
